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Checklist for Self-Identifying Signs of Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) in Adults

Written by and Courtesy of Dr. Jennifer I. Huffman

This checklist can help adults recognize potential signs of Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) in themselves. This checklist is not a diagnostic tool but can provide insights that may warrant further evaluation by a healthcare professional.

Attention and Executive Functioning

- Difficulty sustaining attention on tasks that are not of your choosing or interest.
- Frequently feel distracted or disengaged during activities or conversations.
- Struggle with planning, organizing, and time management.
- Find it challenging to follow multi-step instructions.
- Have difficulty managing emotions and self-regulation.

Sensory Issues

- Over-sensitive or under-sensitive to sounds, lights, textures, or other sensory inputs.
- Easily overwhelmed by sensory stimuli, leading to feelings of anxiety or the need to withdraw.
- Seek out or avoid certain sensory experiences (e.g., loud noises, bright lights).

Anxiety and Demand Avoidance

- Exhibit extreme avoidance of everyday demands and expectations.

Identifying PDA Adults

- Experience high levels of anxiety, particularly when faced with demands.
- Have meltdowns or shutdowns when feeling overwhelmed or pressured.
- Use strategies to avoid demands, such as distraction, negotiation, or withdrawal.

Communication Issues

- Difficulty expressing needs or understanding social cues.
- Struggle with both verbal and non-verbal communication.
- Miscommunications often lead to frustration and increased anxiety.
- Use alternative communication methods (e.g., written notes, text messages).

Learning Issues

- Have an uneven learning profile, excelling in some areas while struggling in others.
- Resist traditional learning methods and standardized approaches.
- Engage more readily in hands-on, experiential learning activities.
- Prefer tasks and activities that align with your strengths and interests.

Social Interaction and Preferred Interests

- Have intense interests or passions that dominate conversations and activities.
- Difficulty engaging in social interactions that do not involve your preferred interests.
- Use preferred interests as a way to connect with others.
- May appear socially adept in areas of interest but struggle in other social contexts.

Emotional and Behavioral Regulation

- High levels of emotional sensitivity and reactivity.
- Difficulty identifying and expressing emotions.
- Frequent mood swings or emotional outbursts.
- Use coping mechanisms such as rocking, spinning, or other repetitive behaviors.

Felt Safety and Trauma-Informed Concerns

- Display heightened sensitivity to stress and changes in routine.
- Require a predictable and consistent environment to feel safe.
- Exhibit signs of trauma or heightened anxiety in response to stressors.
- Benefit from a calm, patient, and empathetic approach from others.

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Additional Concerns

- Difficulty making and maintaining friendships.
- Often feel misunderstood or different from peers.
- Show signs of demand avoidance in various settings (e.g., work, social situations).
- Experience physical symptoms related to anxiety (e.g., stomachaches, headaches).

Next Steps for Self-Identification

If you check multiple items on this list and have concerns about your behavior, consider the following steps:

1. Self-Reflection:

- Spend time reflecting on your experiences and behaviors. Consider keeping a journal to document your thoughts and feelings.

2. Seek Professional Guidance:

- Consult with a healthcare professional, such as a psychologist or psychiatrist, who has experience with autism spectrum and PDA.
- Request a comprehensive evaluation that includes assessments of attention, executive functioning, sensory processing, anxiety, communication, and learning.

3. Explore Neurodiversity-Affirming Assessments:

- Consider assessments that use a neurodiversity-affirming approach, such as the MIGDAS-2 (Monteiro Interview Guidelines for Diagnosing the Autism Spectrum, Second Edition).

4. Educate Yourself:

- Read books and articles by experts in the field.
- Explore online resources and research papers to stay updated on the latest findings.

5. Join Support Networks:

- Participate in online forums and support groups for adults with PDA or autism spectrum.
- Connect with local or national organizations dedicated to autism and PDA for additional resources and support.

6. Implement Coping Strategies:

- Use relaxation techniques and mindfulness activities to help manage anxiety.
- Create a sensory-friendly environment at home and work. Allow the use of sensory tools (e.g., noise-canceling headphones, fidget toys).

7. Focus on Preferred Interests:

- Incorporate your preferred interests into daily activities and routines. Use these interests as a way to connect with others and build rapport.

8. Adopt a Trauma-Informed Approach:

- Recognize that you may have experienced trauma or have heightened sensitivity to stress. Approach self-care with sensitivity, avoiding punitive measures and focusing on positive reinforcement.

9. Seek Accommodations:

- If applicable, seek accommodations at work or in educational settings to support your needs. This may include flexible schedules, modified tasks, or additional support.